

McGovern, G., Raffaelli, M., Moreno Garcia, C., & Larson, R. (2020). Leaders' Cultural Responsiveness in a Rural Program Serving Latinx Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 35(3), 368–394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558419873893>

# Journal of Adolescent Research

## Leaders' Cultural Responsiveness in a Rural Program Serving Latinx Youth

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Journal:         | <i>Journal of Adolescent Research</i>   |
| Manuscript ID    | JAR-18-222.R1   |
| Manuscript Type: | Empirical Article   |
| Keywords:        | organized activities (after-school, extracurricular), culture/ethnic practices, Latinos (U.S.), positive youth development, immigration issues (includes acculturation, language acquisitions, etc) |
|                  |   |

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## Abstract

**Aims.** To provide examples of culturally responsive practices used by leaders of a rural Latinx-serving youth program.

**Demographics and Setting.** This case study focused on a community youth program in a small, rural Midwestern town. Program leaders (one White man and one Latinx woman) were both middle-aged and had post-secondary degrees. Nine Latinx youth participants (4 girls, 5 boys; *M*<sub>age</sub> = 15.5 years) were primarily from Mexican immigrant families.

**Methodology.** Repeated semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders and youth. Holistic analyses used grounded theory practices and focused on a subset of questions about cultural program experiences.

**Findings.** Leaders of Unified Youth supported the positive development of rural Latinx youth through four categories of culturally responsive practices. They cultivated a safe space that affirmed youth's cultural values and bilingualism; served as trusted allies for youth, connecting across shared experiences and helping youth process discrimination; promoted cultural awareness and appreciation while encouraging youth to explore cultural nuances; and supported youth's leadership development and advocacy through community events promoting cultural awareness.

**Implications.** These rich descriptions of practices contribute to our understanding of cultural responsiveness in context, and can be used to inform research, policy, and practice with Latinx youth in rural communities.

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## Leaders' Cultural Responsiveness in a Rural Program Serving Latinx Youth

Bill Lyons, leader of a program serving Latinx<sup>1</sup> youth in a small Midwestern town, shared a story to illustrate the prejudice and discrimination the Latinx population experienced in the surrounding (mostly White) rural county. A Mexican mother was approached by several women in a car while riding her bike: "They motioned for her to come over to the car. So, she went, and they threw flour in her face and then they took off." Along with his co-leader Juanita Estrada, Bill works to counteract these experiences by creating an alternative narrative, one that promotes dialogue, understanding, and appreciation of Latinx culture among youth and in the larger community. Their program, Unified Youth, provides a compelling case study for how youth program leaders can be culturally responsive to youth.

Youth programs represent important developmental contexts for adolescents (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). Increasing diversity of the United States youth population demands that programs and staff pay attention to issues of culture (Larson & Ngo, 2017; Maxwell-Jolly, 2011). A growing share of this population is Latinx. There are several characteristics of the Latinx youth population of relevance to youth programs. First is its growing size; in 2014, nearly a quarter of United States children under the age of 18 were Latinx, and this figure is expected to increase to a third by 2060 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Second, most (89%) Latinx youth were born in the United States but over half (52%) have one or two foreign-born parents (Fry & Passel, 2009) and thus issues of language and migration are likely to be salient. For instance, recent restrictive immigration policies have increased racial profiling, deportations, discrimination, and chronic fear and distrust among immigrant youth and families (Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Etekal, & Okamoto, 2017; Suárez-Orozco, Motti-Stefanidi, Marks, & Katsiaficas, 2018; Torres, Santiago, Walts, & Richards, 2018). Third, although the umbrella term "Latinx"

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3 implies certain common characteristics (e.g., shared language and roots in Latin America),  
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5 Latinxs in the United States are diverse in terms of ancestry, geographic distribution, and  
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7 immigration experience. Most (63.2%) are of Mexican origin or descent (United States Census  
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9 Bureau, 2017).  
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12 Another consideration is that Latinx youth increasingly live in areas that previously had  
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14 little Latinx presence (Crockett, Carlo, & Temmen, 2016). Historically, Latinx families have  
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16 been concentrated in specific parts of the country, such as areas that were formerly part of  
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18 Mexico (e.g., California, Texas) and traditional migrant destinations on the east coast (e.g.,  
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20 Miami, New York). During the last few decades, Latinxs have dispersed into “new destinations,”  
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22 including rural areas across the Midwest and Southeast (Lichter & Johnson, 2009). Rural  
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24 communities present potential challenges to all residents due to high poverty rates, limited  
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26 educational opportunities, and geographic isolation (Crockett et al., 2016). Living in rural  
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28 communities can pose additional challenges for Latinx families. For example, established  
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30 receiving communities typically have ethnic enclaves that provide services to newcomer families  
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32 (e.g., English classes; bilingual staff at public and private agencies, including youth programs)  
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34 but rural communities typically lack this network of support (Raffaelli & Wiley, 2013). As  
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36 illustrated in the opening vignette, newcomers in rural communities may also face prejudice and  
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38 discrimination from pre-existing (typically European American) residents (Crockett et al., 2016;  
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40 Raffaelli & Wiley, 2013). Our case study examines the culturally responsive practices that the  
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42 leaders at Unified Youth adapted to the needs of Latinx youth in their rural community setting.  
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## 49 **Literature Review**

### 50 **The Role of Culture in Youth Programs**

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52 There is an emerging literature exploring the interface of culture and youth programs  
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(Camacho & Fuligni, 2015; Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012). Culture has been defined in different ways in this literature; for example, Fredricks and Simpkins (2012) pointed out that ethnic or racial affiliation is often used as a marker of culture. We conceptualize culture as a set of principles that guide how members of different groups organize their lives, interpret their experiences, and raise their children (Jensen, 2015). Culture is reflected in values, beliefs, shared experiences, and practices that are typically linked to social group membership (Lonner & Adamopoulos, 1997).

Descriptive and comparative studies reveal similarities in how Latinx and non-Latinx adolescents view youth programs (e.g., reasons for participating; Perkins et al., 2007) but there are also indications of unique factors for Latinx youth. Themes emerging across studies include the importance that Latinx youth place on positive relationships with adult staff and on experiencing the program as a “safe haven” (e.g., Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Lee, Borden, & Perkins, 2009). An analysis of Mexican-origin adolescents’ experiences in a range of programs, including sports, arts, clubs, and religious activities, revealed the importance they placed on programs valuing and celebrating youth’s cultural backgrounds (e.g., by respecting linguistic differences, helping youth learn about cultural similarities and differences; Ettekal, Gaskin, Lin, & Simpkins, 2015). In a multiethnic sample, only Latinx girls mentioned the opportunity to learn about cultures as a reason for program participation (Perkins et al., 2007). Taken together, these findings highlight the need for program staff to be aware of the distinct needs, expectations, and values that Latinx youth may have.

There is also evidence that program leaders see issues of culture as salient but are not always prepared to respond to challenging cultural dilemmas, such as situations involving discrimination, stereotyping, group conflict, or xenophobia. Leaders from programs serving

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3 primarily Latinx, African American, and European youth indicated that these types of cultural  
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6 dilemmas came up during program activities, but the leaders varied in how directly they engaged  
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8 with them (Gutiérrez, Larson, Raffaelli, Fernandez, & Guzman, 2017). In a study that examined  
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10 adolescents' perceptions of youth programs, Hispanic youth scored lower than African American  
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12 and European American youth on measures of "feeling safe" in their program and reported less  
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14 positive relationships with adult staff than African American youth (Lee et al., 2009). The  
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16 authors suggested that Latinx youth may experience discrimination or lack of acceptance within  
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18 programs, and emphasized the need to examine issues of cultural sensitivity within programs  
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20 (e.g., culturally sensitive programming, ethnicity of program staff; Lee et al., 2009).  
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24 Collectively, these findings are consistent with recent publications emphasizing the  
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26 importance of culturally responsive practices in youth programs (Outley & Witt, 2006; Simpkins  
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28 et al., 2017; Williams & Deutsch, 2016). Cultural issues are prominent for both youth and  
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30 program leaders, though leaders sometimes feel ill-prepared to engage in this nuanced and  
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32 complex work. There has been limited research that identifies what practices leaders can employ  
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34 in their programs to be culturally responsive, particularly in rural youth programs.  
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### 38 **Culturally Responsive Practices**

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40 We drew on multiple sources to think about what it could mean for program leaders to  
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42 be culturally responsive. Educational researcher Geneva Gay (2010) defined culturally  
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44 responsive teaching as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and  
45  
46 performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to  
47  
48 and effective for them" (p. 31). She asserts that culturally responsive teaching is validating and  
49  
50 affirming because it legitimizes youth's cultural heritage, bridges meaningful experiences  
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52 between home and school, and teaches students to know and praise their own and others' cultural  
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3 heritages (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive practices also include staff being proactively  
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5 attentive to differences in power related to culture, race, and SES that could be manifest in a  
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7 setting (Gay, 2010; Kirshner, 2015).  
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10 Youth programs present a unique environment for leaders to create affirming spaces for  
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12 youth from different cultural backgrounds. Compared to schools, they are typically smaller and  
13  
14 less institutionalized, have greater flexibility, and provide more opportunities for staff and youth  
15  
16 to form strong relationships (Deutsch & Jones, 2008; Halpern, 2002). As with much discussion  
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18 of youth programs, our examination of practices at Unified Youth was informed by the 2002  
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20 report of the National Research Council's (NRC) Committee on Community-Level Programs for  
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22 Youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The report identified eight features of settings that research  
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24 shows promote youth development: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure;  
25  
26 supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and  
27  
28 mattering; opportunities for skill-building; and integration of family, school, and community  
29  
30 efforts. The committee emphasized that these features must be adapted to the local cultural  
31  
32 context noting that "any program that is not sensitive to participants' culture is not likely to  
33  
34 succeed" (p. 114). However, they did not provide specific guidance on how this could be  
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36 accomplished.  
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42 In a forward-looking theoretical article, Simpkins and colleagues (2017) suggested  
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44 several strategies for program leaders to adapt each of the eight features to be culturally  
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46 responsive in their work with youth. The authors define staff practices as: "staff's knowledge,  
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48 skills, attitudes, and day-to-day interactions with adolescents, families, and each other"  
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50 (Simpkins et al., 2017, p. 14), and their examples reflect actions leaders could take in their  
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52 programs. For instance, to create physical and psychological safety, these authors suggested that  
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3 programs serving youth from different cultural groups should: “Address specific safety concerns  
4 of adolescents who are marginalized, victimized, or have other safety concerns (e.g., lack  
5 citizenship documentation)” (p. 15). These strategies provide guidance for programs that was  
6 linked to the research literature; however, this paper did not present findings on how practices  
7 have been implemented in programs serving ethnically diverse youth.  
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15 Across the educational and youth program literature there is a recognition that cultural  
16 responsiveness requires adapting practices to the particular population of youth and community  
17 context (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Erbstein & Fabionar, 2019; Simpkins et al., 2017). But in-  
18 depth discovery research is needed that examines *how* leaders adapt and implement culturally  
19 responsive practices to specific populations, such as Latinx youth in rural contexts.  
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**Current Study**

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28 The current study was aimed at identifying culturally responsive practices in Unified  
29 Youth, a program serving Latinx youth from immigrant (primarily Mexican origin) families in a  
30 rural, predominantly White community. As discussed earlier, rural communities are important to  
31 study because they represent distinct contexts for Latinx youth and families due to geographic  
32 isolation, lack of services, and potential hostility towards newcomers (Crockett et al., 2016;  
33 Raffaelli & Wiley, 2013). We drew from the NRC (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), Simpkins et al.  
34 (2017), and research by others: We used their findings and frameworks as “sensitizing concepts”  
35 (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) that helped us conceptualize and understand the culturally responsive  
36 processes associated with the practices we identified.  
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49 The study employed qualitative methods because we wanted to describe these culturally  
50 responsive practices in context, as enacted and experienced by the participants and leaders. Our  
51 goal was to understand how the local rural context and leaders’ philosophies shaped their use. A  
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3 case study provides the opportunity for in-depth holistic study of a program, its community,  
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5 context, and how culturally responsive practices are adapted to this context. Case studies use an  
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7 intensive focus to maintain “empirical intimacy” with the data (Sandelowski, 2011) and are well-  
8  
9 suited to studying novel and vivid exemplars (e.g., Yin, 2009).

**Method****Study Site**

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17 Unified Youth (UY<sup>2</sup>) is a community-based youth coalition centered in a small town  
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19 (population ~3,000) in a rural Midwestern county. At the time of the study, the county’s  
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21 approximately 20,000 residents were predominantly Non-Hispanic White (91%), with Hispanics  
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23 making up 7% of the county’s population (based on data from the 2010 United States Census;  
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25 county name withheld to ensure anonymity). The Latinx population is relatively new to the area:  
26  
27 in 1980 there were around 200 Hispanic residents in the entire county (1% of the population).  
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29 The Latinx share of the county’s population has approximately doubled each decade since 1980  
30  
31 and continues to grow. UY operates out of a community center that provides residents with  
32  
33 multiple services, ranging from information about health, jobs, and public services to computer  
34  
35 and internet access. There is an emphasis on serving the county’s growing Latinx population  
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37 (e.g., by providing bilingual information and translation services).

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42 Although program leader Bill Estrada felt that the town itself had acclimated to its  
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44 immigrant population (perhaps because over one third of the town’s residents was now Latinx),  
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46 he described the rest of the county’s communities as slower to adapt and often hostile to  
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48 immigrants. In one interview, Bill stated that “racism is still rampant” in the area; therefore,  
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50 leaders saw part of their role as helping youth develop strategies to cope with prejudice and  
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52 encouraging youth to recognize their assets. In 2008, Juanita Estrada, a mental health counselor,  
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3 wrote the grant that established the UY program in response to her clients' experiences of  
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5 prejudice and discrimination. She described, "The purpose of the original grant was to promote  
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7 dialogue among culturally diverse youth. It was also to develop a youth coalition and the main  
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9 part of that was to give the community a voice." Over the years, UY participants have planned a  
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11 range of community activities, such as organizing information fairs, hosting community social  
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13 events, and producing public service announcements.  
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17 The year of the study, UY organized two major events. College is Possible was designed  
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19 to give youth in the community information about how to apply and prepare for college and  
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21 scholarships, as well as about alternative career options (e.g., military, law enforcement,  
22  
23 professional training). UY also hosted a Hispanic Heritage fair for the community which  
24  
25 celebrated the food, dance, and art of youth's cultures. Weekly meetings of the youth coalition  
26  
27 were typically organized and run by the youth; the officers (president or vice president) led the  
28  
29 meetings but all youth were expected to participate in discussions and decision-making, and  
30  
31 individual youth volunteered for (or were assigned) tasks to complete before the next meeting.  
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33 The two leaders tended to interject only occasionally, typically by posing questions or making a  
34  
35 comment to get youth back on track. Research team members who conducted observations  
36  
37 described the leaders' approach as deliberately "hands-off" and "sideline or backstage." These  
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39 dynamics were reinforced by the seating arrangements – typically, the youth sat at a round table  
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41 while the leaders sat slightly apart or away from the table.  
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47 **Program leaders.** The program leaders – Bill Lyons and Juanita Estrada – are both in  
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49 their early fifties and have post-secondary degrees. They are both long-time community  
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51 residents. Bill, who directs the larger community center out of which the youth program  
52  
53 operates, is a White man who grew up in an Irish Catholic farm family in a rural Midwestern  
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3 town. Bill speaks Spanish and his wife is Latinx. Juanita is a bilingual/biracial (Mexican and  
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5 White) woman who grew up locally. She knows many of the youth's families through her work  
6  
7 as a mental health counselor.  
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10 **Program youth.** During the time of the study (2011-2012 academic year), nine Latinx  
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12 youth participated in the program and all agreed to be in the study. There were four girls and five  
13  
14 boys who ranged in age from 12 to 18 (mean = 15.5 years). Eight were of Mexican origin or  
15  
16 descent and seven had been born outside of the United States. Most of the youth's parents came  
17  
18 from rural Mexican backgrounds and had immigrated to this rural county to work in a local  
19  
20 factory.  
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### 23 **Data Collection**

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26 Data were collected as part of a larger study aimed at understanding developmental  
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28 processes and staff practices in high-quality programs (see AUTHOR CITE). Programs were  
29  
30 selected following techniques for identifying high-quality programs developed by McLaughlin,  
31  
32 Irby, and Langman (1994). Study inclusion criteria included having experienced leaders, low  
33  
34 youth and staff turnover, and that the program prioritized youth development and employed a  
35  
36 youth-centered approach. We also prioritized programs that served low-income and working-  
37  
38 class youth. All youth at participating programs were invited to take part in the study. A research  
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40 team member presented information about the study to youth and gave them a parent information  
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42 letter (in English and Spanish) that described the study and gave instructions for opting youth out  
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44 of the study; youth assent was also obtained. Participants received modest monetary incentives.  
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47 All study procedures were approved by the relevant Institutional Review Boards.  
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51 The data for UY consisted of semi-structured interviews with the two leaders (total of  
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53 eight interviews) and the nine youth (28 interviews), conducted at four time points across the  
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3 program cycle (early fall, early winter, late winter, mid-spring). Interviews were audiotaped,  
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5 transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. Seven observations of program activities were  
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7 used for background and context, along with pilot interviews with the two leaders and seven  
8  
9 youth. Unless otherwise specified, the data presented here are from youth and leader interviews.  
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12 Interview protocols were designed to elicit detailed accounts of leaders' experiences and  
13  
14 practices, and youth's experiences in the program. They were developed based on the research  
15  
16 team's prior studies and the literature and were piloted and refined. Interview protocols consisted  
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18 of structured open-ended questions and probes; interviewers were trained to follow up and obtain  
19  
20 full responses. The primary data for our analysis consisted of responses to question sets asked  
21  
22 during the fourth (final) interview, in which leaders and youth were asked about their cultural  
23  
24 experiences in the program. Youth were asked about their family background and culture, how  
25  
26 the program helped them learn about their own and others' cultures, and how leaders' culture and  
27  
28 background influenced their relationships. Leaders were asked about their culture and  
29  
30 background, how these influenced their relationships with youth, and ways the program provided  
31  
32 activities or discussions related to the youth's culture or backgrounds.  
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### 37 **Coding and Analysis**

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40 Analysis was conducted using established practices of grounded theory and other  
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42 qualitative methods to achieve fidelity, consensus, and integrity among multiple coders over  
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44 multiple iterations (Hill et al., 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). First, three coders read the  
45  
46 pertinent youth interview segments that included responses to structured questions about culture  
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48 from the fourth time point. We used an iterative process to identify youth's descriptions of  
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50 culturally responsive practices that consisted of conducting independent line-by-line coding  
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52 (Charmaz, 2014), comparing and discussing emerging codes, and developing and refining  
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operational definitions, thus engaging in constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Through this process, a set of twelve codes was identified and defined for the youth data. A similar iterative process was conducted with the leader data, resulting in a set of sixteen codes. Written descriptions and operational definitions were generated for the youth and leader codes.

**Focused and axial coding.** We also searched the full body of interview data for additional segments using the following selection criteria: segments that (a) referred to the program (as opposed to school or home), and (b) included mention or reference to youth's or leaders' culture or background. We then applied the codes systematically to these segments. This allowed us to identify additional examples of culturally responsive practices or their felt effects from youth, and to continue to refine the codes and definitions. This process was also iterative and involved constant comparative analysis which resulted in combination, elimination, and creation of new codes (Charmaz, 2014). Frequent memoing helped to clarify the meaning within and distinctions between codes. At this stage we also used axial coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to draw connections between codes and sensitizing concepts from existing literature, including the eight features suggested by the NRC (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) and Simpkins et al. (2017). The final codes represent a set of culturally responsive practices used by leaders in UY. It should be noted that the practices that emerged from these data primarily involved face-to-face relational practices (i.e., at "the point of service") between staff, youth, and sometimes their families, and fewer of what the NRC and Simpkins et al. called "program structures" and institutional-level practices.

**Trustworthiness.** The coding team consisted of two self-identified Latinx female undergraduate students led by a White graduate student and supervised by the second author, who has expertise in Latinx families. To minimize interpretive biases, at least two coders

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3 analyzed each transcript separately, then compared findings and discussed discrepancies (Hill et  
4 al., 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Emerging findings were discussed with the senior authors,  
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6 who were familiar with the programs and participants.  
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### 9 10 **Findings**

11  
12 Leaders and youth described culturally responsive practices falling into four overarching  
13 categories (see Table 1). Although these are presented as distinct categories for the sake of  
14 clarity, there is considerable overlap in the ways these practices were implemented.  
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#### 18 19 **Leaders Cultivated a Safe Space**

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21 Bill and Juanita promoted a safe and welcoming environment that emphasized youth's  
22 cultural values and linguistic abilities as assets. According to the NRC, "safety is essential for  
23 positive youth development" (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 89) and developmental researchers  
24 maintain that unsafe school and neighborhood environments can potentially inhibit minority  
25 children's development (García Coll et al., 1996; Stein, Gonzales, García Coll, & Prandoni,  
26 2016). UY leaders legitimized youth's cultural heritage and built meaningful bridges between  
27 youth's home and program experiences, which promoted youth's experience of safety in the  
28 program.  
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40 **Leaders valued bilingualism.** Leaders' support for youth's bilingualism sent a powerful  
41 message that youth were safe and accepted in the program. At UY, youth were appreciative of  
42 the leaders' ability to speak Spanish and enthusiastic about their own bilingual abilities. One  
43 youth mused, "I think it's awesome, knowing a different language. ... I like people coming up to  
44 me and asking me questions about Spanish. ... I feel very proud that I know Spanish."  
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51 Bill tried to understand conversational cues that explained when youth chose to use  
52 Spanish or English. He discerned that "when it's business, it's English. When it's fun, it's  
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3 Spanish ... It seems that when they get to talking about their culture and they get in the joking  
4 mood, it automatically flips to Spanish.” Bill also recognized that youth tended to revert to  
5 Spanish when “they want to make more of a point ... It means more to them in the Spanish  
6 language than the English language.” The choice of language also depended on the situation:  
7 when youth were relating to each other, they spoke mostly Spanish. They tended to use English  
8 in formal settings in school or the community, and when they were “being sensitive to others in  
9 the group they don’t wanna leave out.”

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12 **Leaders fostered a “family-like” atmosphere.** The physical and activity environments  
13 that leaders created celebrated youth’s cultural backgrounds. The program space at UY was a  
14 large central room with smaller spaces opening out from it, and included a children’s play area,  
15 sitting area for TV watching, and a study area for tutoring and homework help. The main room  
16 was painted bright yellow, and cultural artifacts adorned the space (e.g., Mexican and United  
17 States flags, woven blankets, dolls dressed in indigenous South American costumes, a llama and  
18 toucan made of colored paper). In this way, the physical space reflected youth’s cultural origins.

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21 Youth and leaders expressed that UY felt “like a second family.” Juanita described the  
22 respect youth showed each other and program leaders as mirroring a dynamic that is valued in  
23 Mexican families: “working together ... and valuing each person, considering everyone in the  
24 family unit as equal, maybe with different roles but equal.” Juanita described hearing youth  
25 discuss academics and extracurricular activities in the program and noticed “they are very  
26 supportive of each other and they’re very expressive of that support.” Juanita emphasized that  
27 this way of relating spread to all aspects of the program: “What we do is so natural. It’s in every  
28 conversation ... we’re very supportive and encouraging.”

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31 Leaders were strongly committed to supporting values that families held for their

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3 children. Juanita drew parallels between immigrant parents' strong work ethic, "working two and  
4 three jobs and working day and night," and youth's "[taking] school very seriously and [viewing]  
5 it as their job." Youth expressed deep appreciation for their parents' struggles; one noted that the  
6 value parents placed on youth's involvement at school and with the program "makes me just  
7 want to try harder in everything." Some youth were motivated to become involved in the  
8 program because their parents were not afforded similar opportunities when they were young.  
9 UY provided youth the opportunity to take leadership positions and to plan and organize  
10 community events. One youth saw participating in the program as fulfilling parental goals:

21 It's great for them to know that I'm in a group that helps others and makes a difference  
22 because that's what they've always taught me to do. So, I guess they're proud of me and  
23 have more respect for me.  
24  
25  
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27

28 Leaders also contributed to the family dynamic at UY by investing in relationships with  
29 youth's families outside of the program. Bill developed a relationship with several parents  
30 including the father of a girl in the program: "I knew that he worked in the restaurant. Now we  
31 kind of look for each other, and bounce off each other certain things, especially about [her], and  
32 about what [UY] is doing." Leaders' interactions with family members in the community  
33 affirmed the respect they had for youth's families. Leaders built meaningful bridges by aligning  
34 the language and values held in youth's families to those used in the program. In this way,  
35 leaders at UY fostered an environment where youth felt safe to express their culture.  
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### 46 **Leaders Served as Trusted Allies for Youth**

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48  
49 Foundational to UY's operations was an ethos of trust and respect between youth and  
50 program leaders. Strong youth-adult relationships are central features of developmental  
51 environments (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In interviews, leaders described the goal of  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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3 empowering youth as agents in their own lives. To meet this goal, Bill and Juanita related their  
4  
5 life experiences to help youth envision pathways for themselves. The trust between youth and  
6  
7 leaders allowed them to engage in difficult discussions about episodes of discrimination youth  
8  
9 experienced. Discussions like these have been used by parents to promote their children's  
10  
11 awareness of bias and prepare them to cope with it (Hughes et al., 2006).  
12  
13

14  
15 **Leaders used their experiences as points of connection.** For Juanita, trust and respect  
16  
17 were deeply intertwined with youth being able to identify with the leaders' messages. She saw  
18  
19 this when she and her brother spoke about their college experience at a College is Possible event:  
20

21 It was a process. The first piece was ... this reality, this grounding, this identification with  
22  
23 somebody they knew and trusted and respected. I think the next phase was presenting it  
24  
25 to them in a way that it was attractive to them. [It was important that] they saw us as role  
26  
27 models and they liked us as people and that they saw us as successful.  
28  
29

30  
31 By sharing their experiences, the leaders helped youth to see that they could also pursue higher  
32  
33 education. Bill, who also participated in the event, described breaking the process into steps,  
34

35 A lot of the kids know that I went to college. And that's this big, far-off abyss, as far as  
36  
37 they're concerned, at least initially.... But they don't know that I started at [the local  
38  
39 community college]. And so, you can see that there's a *relief* in one standpoint of "Well,  
40  
41 I can do [Community College]."  
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44  
45 Bill also described how aspects of his background allowed him to relate to youth in  
46  
47 different ways. For instance, as a Catholic in an anti-Catholic town he related to their  
48  
49 experiences of discrimination, and his Catholicism connected him to youth, as many were also  
50  
51 Catholic. He also drew parallels between his family background and youth's. He summarized  
52  
53 how sharing his experiences led to trust:  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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3 They can see that even though I'm older and maybe from a different background or a  
4 different area, I can relate to them. If I can talk about my experiences growing up, there  
5 may be things that have happened to me, they can see [that I am] trustworthy because  
6 I've been through it.  
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12 Being able to identify with leaders was something youth described as being motivational.  
13

14 One youth said:  
15

16 I always said [the leaders are] examples. It means a lot. Actions speak louder than words.  
17 They're really hard-working so I looked at them and was like, "Wow, these people work  
18 really hard. So, I should work really hard too."  
19  
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23

24 **Leaders helped youth process instances of discrimination.** The safe environment at  
25 UY and trusting relationships with leaders gave youth a setting to discuss their experiences of  
26 discrimination. As described in [AUTHOR CITE], Juanita shared an incident where a youth  
27 came to the program after experiencing prejudice. He had tried to join the school's mostly White  
28 band but felt "rejected by the band members." After learning that several other students had  
29 experienced similar situations, Juanita offered to use her experience as a counselor to help youth  
30 talk about what they had been through. Juanita provided youth the space to talk about their  
31 experiences of prejudice and discrimination and "followed their lead" in terms of where and how  
32 far to take the conversation. The youth continued the conversation in future meetings, sharing  
33 experiences of discrimination and processing the accompanying emotions with Juanita's support.  
34 Leaders' willingness to engage in discussions on issues important to youth demonstrated their  
35 presence as trusted allies.  
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51 **Leaders Promoted Cultural Awareness**  
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53 In direct response to youth's lived experiences of prejudice and discrimination, leaders  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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2  
3 provided opportunities for youth to understand and appreciate their own culture at the same time  
4  
5 they prepared them for potential negative experiences. Parents engage in this *cultural*  
6  
7 *socialization* to promote the development of a racial, cultural, or ethnic identity that builds a  
8  
9 connection to or strengthens youth's sense of group membership (Hughes et al., 2006). Bill  
10  
11 frequently and readily voiced positive messages about youth's culture. Juanita encouraged youth  
12  
13 to examine the ways they perceived being Latinx, and sometimes demonstrated an alternative  
14  
15 way of being Latinx.  
16  
17

18  
19 **Leaders encouraged youth to explore and celebrate their cultural identity.** Bill felt  
20  
21 that a major part of his role was to boost youth's self-worth—to emphasize the unique  
22  
23 contributions they could offer because of their heritage. He recognized that youth might feel  
24  
25 alienated because “they're different from most people in [the community].” Leaders encouraged  
26  
27 youth to explore and celebrate their cultural identity in several ways. As discussed earlier,  
28  
29 leaders valued youth's bilingual abilities, and recognized them as points of pride and strength.  
30  
31 Juanita called being bilingual a “huge confidence booster,” noting that youth “enjoy the fact  
32  
33 they're bilingual.”  
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36  
37 Bill communicated a consistent message to youth “that their uniqueness also has  
38  
39 strengths. They have unique qualities or unique experiences that no one else has.” One issue Bill  
40  
41 found weighed on youth was their immigration status,<sup>3</sup> because of the views expressed by some  
42  
43 of the townspeople. Bill countered these sentiments with positive messages:  
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46  
47 You are citizens of Mexico. That's something to be proud of, something to grasp onto,  
48  
49 something to really embrace. There is *nothing* wrong with that. There's no shame. It's a  
50  
51 *beautiful* country ... look at all the lovely people, and the culture, the richness you bring.  
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54 When he brought youth this perspective, he would “see them immediately light up. They hadn't  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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3 heard that from *anybody*. They embrace that.”

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5 Bill also communicated egalitarian messages to reinforce that youth were worthy of what  
6 society had to offer as a way of preparing them to deal with future discrimination: “They’re  
7 human beings. Their skins might be a different color, or their language might be different. That  
8 has nothing to do with who they are... And they’re gonna be faced with that all their lives.”

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14 **Leaders discussed diversity within cultures.** Leaders’ discussions with youth about  
15 what it meant to be Latinx focused primarily on within-group variations. For example, youth and  
16 leaders tended to emphasize the differences between the five regions in Mexico from which the  
17 youth or their families immigrated. Bill recognized that these distinctions were important to the  
18 youth, partly because they were sensitive to the hierarchical divisions between regions in the  
19 north and south in Mexico, which he likened to north-south divisions in the United States. Youth  
20 noticed the distinctions in the way people behave and the music they listen to. One shared,  
21 “Sometimes I feel like if I go back to southern Mexico and I start talking, they’re going to go,  
22 ‘What are you saying? You sound like a northerner.’” The only non-Mexican youth in the  
23 program noted differences between herself and her peers, “especially the words that they use.”

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Juanita saw her role as not only encouraging youth to recognize their assets but also as  
“challenging some of their views of what it means to be Mexican.” For instance, she noted that  
youth distinguished between being immigrants from Mexico and being of Mexican descent. A  
youth explained how they perceived the differences: “[We] come to the United States and it’s a  
whole different new world. They haven’t really gone through that because they’ve grown up  
here.” Juanita’s openness to youth conducting this cultural identity work reflected her goals for  
the program: “I think this group provides a place to talk about it. To be proud and to explore the  
differences.” UY leaders created a program environment where youth’s culture was visible,

1  
2  
3 recognized, and honored.  
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### 5 **Leaders Supported Youth's Leadership and Planning Skills**

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8 Marginalized youth's cultural development can be enhanced by gaining capacities for  
9  
10 social action (Ginwright, 2015; C. Smith, McGovern, Larson, Hillaker, & Peck, 2016).  
11  
12 Underlying UY's programming is youth leadership. Youth elect a president and vice president  
13  
14 who develop agendas and facilitate weekly planning meetings for the group's major  
15  
16 undertakings. Meanwhile, the adult leaders take an indirect role, sitting back from the group and  
17  
18 applying gentle encouragement that prompts youth to take perspective, engage with challenging  
19  
20 issues, and navigate cultural dilemmas. During the year of the study, leaders fostered the  
21  
22 development of skills for decision-making, teamwork, and skills for intercultural interactions by  
23  
24 guiding youth as they organized major events, one focused on culture (Hispanic Heritage fair)  
25  
26 and one focused on educational pathways (College is Possible).  
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30  
31 **Leaders provided opportunities for youth to plan and lead cultural events.** The  
32  
33 Hispanic Heritage fair was intended to highlight the food, music, dance, and dress from different  
34  
35 regions in Latin American countries and increase cultural knowledge in the broader, mostly  
36  
37 White, farming community. Planning included youth selecting presenters that represented the  
38  
39 cultures present in the community. One youth said, "We wouldn't want to keep out one family's  
40  
41 heritage, we really want to focus on everybody's." Another explained, "We want to teach [the  
42  
43 community] more about the Hispanic heritage and that not everybody's the same. Every region's  
44  
45 different and we just want to educate them." The event helped to inspire dignity in youth, and  
46  
47 their ability to share this with others. One youth said, "I want to influence in a positive way—to  
48  
49 feel proud of your culture and learn more about other cultures."  
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54 This cultural event also presented opportunities for family involvement. One youth  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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3 described the Hispanic Heritage event as “something that a whole family can enjoy.” Bill  
4  
5 enjoyed seeing some parents get involved: “To see [her] mother’s enthusiasm come out about an  
6  
7 event, that’s something we hadn’t planned on and she hadn’t either.” Similarly, youth responded  
8  
9 positively to having families involved, seeing it as a sign of caring and interest. One said having  
10  
11 her mom help make food and provide authentic clothing was “really good for me. I felt really  
12  
13 happy to have her involved.” Leaders’ ability to embrace family contributions helped to reinforce  
14  
15 the value of youth’s cultural assets, including their families, in planning the event.  
16  
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18

19 Youth’s church communities also represented important resources. Juanita commented,  
20  
21 “in almost every meeting there’s a reference to ... their church or using that as a resource.” Youth  
22  
23 suggested using their churches’ kitchens, announcing the events through the churches’ bulletins,  
24  
25 and recruiting volunteers from their congregations. Juanita felt that youth’s ability to “tap into ...  
26  
27 this community of adults” created new possibilities for the event’s success. In addition, it helped  
28  
29 youth learn to draw on yet another asset, their community connections, a skill that would serve  
30  
31 them beyond the event.  
32  
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34

35 **Leaders helped youth learn to advocate for their future.** In coordinating events about  
36  
37 college access, youth acquired valuable information and skills for navigating complex and  
38  
39 potentially barrier-laden routes to higher education and careers. After the first year when  
40  
41 Juanita’s brother and Bill were the main presenters at the College is Possible event, youth took  
42  
43 over research and planning for the event, and offered informational sessions to youth in nearby  
44  
45 towns. Bill described the two-fold purpose of having youth take the lead:  
46  
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48

49 When they were involved in planning, not only were they presenting all this in-depth,  
50  
51 technical information to the community, but we knew it was also going to be information  
52  
53 that they could benefit from learning how to access scholarships and go to college.  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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3 Leaders recognized that youth would face real or perceived barriers in pursuing higher  
4 education. For example, as youth began to see college as a real possibility, some became  
5 frustrated by the limitations of their documentation status. Juanita summarized what the leaders  
6 heard from youth, “The comment has been, ‘So what, so we get a degree and we can’t really  
7 work, so where do we go?’” In response, UY leaders focused on promoting the Development,  
8 Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act and educating youth about their  
9 educational options. (The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA] Program was  
10 introduced after data collection ended.) The support from leaders made a difference for youth.

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21 One commented:

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24 They knew for a fact that I could, that I *would* go to college and for me I kind of doubted  
25 myself that I would be able to get to that. Personally, for a Hispanic, it’s kind of a hard  
26 thing to do and they knew, “You’re going to go.” And I was like, “Okay.”

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30  
31 Leaders also recognized and respected that not all youth were interested in being college-  
32 bound. It was important to leaders to expose youth to multiple possible pathways, including the  
33 military, law enforcement, and professional skills training. Bill explained:

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37 We’ve taken the approach that we want to expose them to the alternative life. If they’re  
38 headed for college, we wanted to show them that the working class has its benefits as  
39 well. But we probably would focus more on getting the working class kids to think about  
40 college and expose them to that ... What that would be like: choosing to be a professional  
41 as opposed to someone who works in the factory every day, to be the engineer as opposed  
42 to the line worker.

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51 Bill and Juanita wanted youth to “make their own decision” but also wanted to make sure that  
52 they were informed about the possibilities, providing an alternative to the negative messages they  
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3 may have received about the possibility of college for Latinx, especially for undocumented  
4  
5 immigrants.  
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### 7 8 **Discussion** 9

10 This in-depth case study provides specific examples of culturally responsive practices in  
11 context. These rich descriptions contribute nuance to how we understand the ways leaders  
12 respond to youth's lived experiences within their community. We speculate that UY leaders'  
13 practices reflected the needs of these Latinx youth as they navigated the challenges of being from  
14 an immigrant family in a White, sometimes hostile rural community. Our analyses yielded four  
15 categories of practices that reflected UY leaders' responsiveness to youth in this context: They  
16 cultivated a safe space; served as trusted allies for youth; promoted cultural awareness; and  
17 supported youth's leadership and planning skills. The findings both confirm and build upon  
18 previous research. The four categories connect closely to several of the features for effective  
19 youth development programming proposed by the NRC (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) and applied  
20 to culturally responsive programs by Simpkins et al. (2017), as well as other researchers.  
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35 The creation of a physically and emotionally safe space is a basic and necessary condition  
36 for positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), and can be particularly important for  
37 marginalized youth who experience threats in other parts of their lives. Research suggests that  
38 navigating dual cultural contexts can be stressful for youth (Romero & Roberts, 2003), and that  
39 Latinx youth may experience threats to safety in programs including discrimination and  
40 disrespect (Lee et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2016; Simpkins et al., 2017). Recent models of child  
41 development emphasize the importance of settings that affirm youth's culture in enhancing  
42 racial-ethnic minority youth development (García Coll et al., 1996; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).  
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54 Immigrant youth can benefit from opportunities to choose how they retain their ethnic identity  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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3 and develop a new identity as part of their country of settlement (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind,  
4 & Vedder, 2001). UY leaders cultivated safety by valuing bilingualism and fostering a family-  
5 like atmosphere that upheld shared family values. By affirming youth's cultural backgrounds,  
6  
7 leaders contributed to youth's opportunities to belong and an integration of family, school, and  
8  
9 community efforts (Eccles & Gootman, 2002); to creating a welcoming and inclusive  
10  
11 environment (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010); and to creating a sense of sanctuary (Akiva,  
12  
13 Carey, Cross, Delale-O'Connor, & Brown, 2017). In particular, UY leaders' embrace of youth's  
14  
15 bilingualism is a meaningful statement. By not restricting youth's language to English, the  
16  
17 program afforded youth a place for self-expression that reinforced their cultural identity  
18  
19 (Morland, 2007) and legitimized their cultural heritage (Gay, 2010). Native-language usage is  
20  
21 frequently thwarted in programs by English dominance policy priorities that undermine youth's  
22  
23 cultural identity (Gast, Okamoto, & Feldman, 2017). In addition, rural residents may not have  
24  
25 access outside of the program to bilingual services and resources (Crockett et al., 2016). The  
26  
27 affirmation of youth's native language and cultural values engendered a physically and  
28  
29 emotionally safe environment for youth's cultural expression.  
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38 In serving as trusted allies for youth, leaders leveraged shared backgrounds to form  
39  
40 meaningful relationships with youth and helped them process instances of discrimination.  
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42 Mentoring research has shown that similarity in experiences and interests may be equally or  
43  
44 more important for effective relationships than shared racial or ethnic background (Sánchez &  
45  
46 Colón, 2005). Close affective and instrumental relationships can help youth access needed  
47  
48 support (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Sánchez & Colón, 2005; Walker, 2011) and facilitate youth's  
49  
50 reliance on trusted leaders to magnify their learning and growth (Griffith & Larson, 2016). At  
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52 UY, these supportive relationships contributed to youth feeling comfortable sharing painful  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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3 experiences of discrimination. Studies suggest that parents who talk with their children about  
4 bias and discrimination and help them identify coping strategies bolster youth's psychological  
5 resources for dealing with discrimination and stereotypes (Hughes et al., 2006). Fostering an  
6 environment that enables youth to be emotionally vulnerable has been identified as an effective  
7 feature in other afterschool programs (Ngo, 2017; C. Smith et al., 2016). Immigrants in "new  
8 destination" rural contexts may have trouble gaining access to social capital (Crockett et al.,  
9 2016). By building relationships with youth through their shared backgrounds, UY leaders were  
10 able to connect participants and their families to valuable social capital in the community.  
11 Access to adult resources such as information, assistance, support, and encouragement can  
12 promote adolescents' development (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005).  
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26 Leaders promoted cultural awareness by encouraging youth to explore and celebrate their  
27 cultural identities and discussing diversity within cultures. As characterized by Simpkins et al.  
28 (2017), opportunities for skill building include supporting youth to develop abilities to navigate  
29 multiple cultural worlds (e.g., empathy, perspective-taking, problem-solving). These  
30 interpersonal skills are complex to develop, and program leaders may need to invest significant  
31 effort and expertise in order to instill them in youth (C. Smith et al., 2016). UY leaders helped  
32 youth understand regional differences within Mexican culture and reconcile the cultural  
33 differences between Mexico and the United States. The rural community UY served did not have  
34 an ethnic enclave to facilitate immigrants' social integration and provide a sense of community  
35 (Crockett et al., 2016). UY may have served some of these functions, providing an infrastructure  
36 for youth and their families to sustain their heritage, language, and cultural practices.  
37 Opportunities for youth to explore, celebrate, and develop pride in their cultural identity has been  
38 shown to support youth's positive development (E. P. Smith, Witherspoon, & Osgood, 2017).  
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## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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3 A final way leaders were culturally responsive to youth was to foster youth's leadership  
4 skills. Shawn Ginwright, an activist and researcher, advocates for the importance of youth  
5 developing skills for social action as a way to "claim power and control over sometimes daunting  
6 social conditions" (2011, p. 37). Leaders put youth in charge of cultural and informational events  
7 and provided judicious support. These activities provided youth opportunities to exercise  
8 autonomy, practice strategic thinking, and develop leadership skills, thus supporting youth's  
9 sense of efficacy and mattering (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Simpkins et al., 2017). The Hispanic  
10 Heritage event provided youth opportunities for leadership development, to learn about their own  
11 and others' cultures, and to interact with and educate community members about their cultural  
12 backgrounds, allowing youth to use their voice (Diversi & Mecham, 2005). The event served an  
13 important function given the rural community's lack of familiarity with Hispanic cultures. This  
14 type of cultural socialization, rooted in youth's heritage, can be associated with positive  
15 outcomes, including increases in youth's positive ethnic identity (Quintana & Vera, 1999;  
16 Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, & Sands, 2006). Through the College is Possible event, UY  
17 leaders helped youth negotiate the barriers to receiving a higher education, including challenges  
18 due to immigration status, income disparities, and access to resources. These experiences  
19 supported youth to navigate a complex cultural world, developing strategies for their future  
20 (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

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22  
23 UY leaders employed the practices described in this paper to respond directly to issues  
24 pertinent to youth's experience and the local context. Bill and Juanita were responsive to youth's  
25 relationships with their families and family values; their religious beliefs; their racial, ethnic, and  
26 cultural identities; and their experiences of bias and discrimination. They responded to the rural  
27 community's lack of awareness and cultural resources by providing a consistently supportive  
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space for youth to explore and celebrate their cultural identity and to build strategies for bridging cultural differences and countering prejudice. UY leaders' willingness to talk with youth about both pride and prejudice demonstrated their sensitivity to youth's lived cultural experiences.

### **Future Directions**

The current study can inform future investigations of leader cultural responsiveness. The case study design is ideal for a close examination of practices-in-context. The current study involved a single program serving predominantly Mexican-origin adolescents. Future research should be conducted with additional programs serving other Latinx populations (e.g., Puerto Rican, Dominican) and other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to identify culturally-specific practices and those that might bridge across cultures. An ethnographic approach might provide an even more holistic understanding of the program and community context. Additionally, other regional contexts (urban, suburban) should be investigated. We suggest that leaders' use of culturally responsive practices rise and fall in salience with the needs of youth and in response to the local context. Because the local context evolves, and adolescents and leaders play an active role in influencing and being influenced by the context, we would expect to find differences across programs and leaders. A future study could also expand data collection from youth by inquiring about the effect or impact of various culturally responsive practices on youth's ethnic, racial, or cultural identity or other positive developmental outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to youth development scholarship by identifying culturally responsive practices in a youth program serving Latinx immigrant youth in a rural Midwestern community. The four categories of leader practices identified in the study demonstrate multiple ways that leaders can respond to youth's culture and community context to promote positive

## PROGRAM LEADER CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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2  
3 youth development. These findings have implications for practice and policy. Professional  
4  
5 training for youth program leaders should focus on developing their skills for adapting culturally  
6  
7 responsive practices to specific populations of youth and the communities in which they live  
8  
9 (Outley, Brown, Gabriel, & Sullins, 2018; Outley & Witt, 2006). Latinx youth in rural  
10  
11 communities, these findings suggest, may have needs that differ from their urban counterparts,  
12  
13 especially for cultural affirmation, exploration, and understanding how pervasive racism and  
14  
15 discrimination can create barriers to their success. Leaders who are attuned and responsive to  
16  
17 these needs will be better prepared to support program youth. Also, policies impacting youth  
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19 programs should be sensitive to local contexts, and support leaders' adaptation of programs to  
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21 the needs of youth in those contexts.  
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**Footnotes**

1. We use the gender-inclusive term Latinx to refer to individuals of Latin American origin or descent.
2. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity of the program and its leaders.
3. We did not ask participants about immigration status but became aware that many UY youth (or family members) were undocumented.

For Peer Review

**Tables and Figures**

Table 1.

*Summary of Findings*

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| Culturally responsive practices used by UY leaders                         |
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| Leaders cultivated a safe space.   |
| Leaders valued bilingualism.   |
| Leaders fostered a “family-like” atmosphere.                               |
| Leaders served as trusted allies for youth.                                |
| Leaders used their experiences as points of connection.                    |
| Leaders helped youth process instances of discrimination.                  |
| Leaders promoted cultural awareness.                                       |
| Leaders encouraged youth to explore and celebrate their cultural identity. |
| Leaders discussed diversity within cultures.                               |
| Leaders supported youth’s leadership and planning skills.                  |
| Leaders provided opportunities for youth to plan and lead cultural events. |
| Leaders helped youth learn to advocate for their future.                   |

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